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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: WILL BOLIVIA'S MILITARY OBEY EVO?

REF: LA PAZ 3013

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary. In conversations with EmbOffs, top military leadership in La Paz defended their decision to accommodate Constituent Assembly sessions at a military school, a move that prompted Sucre's violent November 23-24 demonstrations. They also stress they did not create the Sucre problem, did not send troops against the demonstrators (despite President Evo Morales' wishes), and are constitutionally bound to "protect the government." But, many field officers disagree and are critical of government policies and their own high command. In fact, these field officers are leery of being used for political purposes (and later blamed for the outcome), and claim they will not follow orders to clamp down on the opposition departments (states). We have heard from multiple sources that Minister of Defense Walker San Miguel will be sacked in December. End Summary.

Top Brass Stress Legal Role to Protect Government

¶2. (C) The Bolivian military high command consistently states publicly it will uphold the constitution and protect the elected government, and they have told our Military Group Commander and Defense Attach the same in private. High-ranking officers, including Armed Forces Commander Wilfredo Vargas and Army Commander Freddy Bersatti, believe it would be best for the country for the Morales government to peacefully serve out its five-year term. Their worst case scenario is to be ordered to take action against opposition forces should protests turn violent or should opposition leaders try to enact autonomy measures contrary to the constitution. They also fear the involvement of foreign forces (i.e. Venezuelan). In any event, senior ranking officers profess a loyalty not to political parties or personalities, but the role of the armed forces to protect the constitution and by extension the elected government (in accordance with article 208 of the current constitution). They state that they will continue to advise the Bolivian government and the opposition to negotiate peaceful ends to their differences.

But Will Military Bust Heads for Evo?

13. (S) We are aware that opposition-aligned department prefects (state governors) and Civic Committees are contacting Bolivian military general officers regularly for support. (Note: Traditionally opposition-controlled departments are referred as the Media Luna or "half moon," consisting of four of Bolivia's nine departments: Beni, Pando, Tarija, and Santa Cruz. However, recent developments have pushed Chuquisaca and Cochabamba department leaders to coordinate with the Media Luna. End Note.) Many general/flag-level and mid-grade officers are voicing in private their disagreement with current Bolivian government policies, which they consider anti-democratic and to be setting the groundwork for a conversion to a Cuban-style authoritarian regime. If called upon to put down "insurrection," they claim they would side with the Media Luna, or least stay out of their way. Based on MILGP and DAO sources, the current high command does not have the trust or confidence of their subordinates, who would probably not comply with orders to use force to support government policies.

14. (C) In a recent meeting with Brazilian and Peruvian diplomats, we heard a similar assessment, i.e., that the rank and file military will not fire on fellow Bolivians. These diplomats claimed that the Bolivian high command, specifically Generals Bersatti, Trigo and Vargas, were fighting to remain in their positions and in order to curry favor with President Morales, would be inclined to execute his orders. The Peruvian and Brazilian agreed that Venezuelan money into the armed forces had perhaps bought the loyalty of higher-ups but that the middle and lower ranks were resentful, given that they were not receiving it. The Peruvian worried that if Evo asked the military to impose order, and it refused to do so, Morales might call on Hugo Chavez to provide security forces. The Brazilian seriously doubted that there would be a Venezuelan military intervention. Despite the military's queasiness about Evo's political project and apparent willingness to defy orders if he calls upon them to use force against the opposition, both diplomats saw no possibility of a coup. Simply stated, in their view, the Bolivian military does not want to be responsible for the headache that comes with trying to run a government and would not act to remove Evo from power.

Military Leaders Defend Bunker Assembly

15. (S) Commanders Vargas and Bersatti, typically bitter rivals, were in lockstep defending the decision to move November 23 and 24 Constituent Assembly sessions to La Glorieta military academy outside Sucre. They asserted they were complying with a lawful order from the civilian government. They told MILGP Commander they were surprised at opposition complaints the military was protecting an illegally convened Assembly that excluded them "with guns and bayonets." Vargas and Bersatti explained that they understood the motive for the move to the military installation was to provide the Assembly a secure place to convene, not to exclude the opposition, whom they had expected would also move to the academy compound to participate.

16. (C) However, many mid-level officers have complained to MILGP and DAO that they knew the move was inconsistent with a requirement to hold the Assembly in Sucre and would lead to the trampling of other legal requirements under the Constituent Assembly Law. They also said the leadership knew full well the opposition would be excluded and were angered that their senior leadership had exposed the military to accusations of "political control."

Sucre and Beyond: Vargas v. Morales on Crowd Control

¶7. (S) Commander Vargas told MILGP Commander November 27 he was "in trouble" with President Evo Morales for refusing to deploy troops to Sucre. He said he refused requests last week to help the police quell opposition demonstrations out of concern that using young, armed troops would only exacerbate the conflict and increase the potential for unintended lethal confrontations. He advocated crowd control be left to more appropriately-trained riot police. Vargas added that he was loath to place his forces in out-of-control firestorms (not of the military's making). He said he will require a written order from Morales before putting his troops in harm's way for what he regarded as police functions. Vargas added there would also have to be some undefined level of public support in any area the military would be required to secure before he would order troops in.

Fear of Future Sucres

¶8. (S) The military remains concerned that the violent Sucre protests of November 23 and 24 could reoccur throughout the Media Luna, Cochabamba and Chuquisaca departments. Commander Vargas told MILGP Commander he canceled his upcoming trip to the United States because of the potential for violent demonstrations in the near future.

Evo/Military's Strained Relationship

¶9. (C) Although Morales appears to have cemented loyalty with senior commanders, he has eroded support with the armed forces in general though a series of perceived insults and injuries. In October he insulted the military by ignoring events to memorialize troops that had fallen fighting Che Guevara's rebel group. Instead, he attended an event honoring Che and questioned whether Bolivian soldiers who participated in the fighting deserved full military benefits.

Many military officers resent the increasing influence and perceived meddling of Venezuelan military advisors. Morales also has employed the military in a series of social programs (such as manning bread bakeries and distributing checks to school children), which many in the military complain is not their job. (Note: Nevertheless, social development is one of the military's assigned missions. End Note.) Some military leaders also believe Evo is setting up parallel militias to back him in case the military does not, a perceived attack on their institutional integrity that may become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Evo to Ax MOD; No Signs Officers on Chopping Block

¶10. (S) Senior commanders, including Army Commanding General Freddy Bersatti, told MILGP and DAO that they expect 2008 command changes will be largely unpoliticized, based on the slate of promotions sent to the Senate for approval. Although they caveat this prediction with caution, as they readily concede they will not know "for sure" until January. (Comment: Despite Bersatti's assurances, we doubt politics will not factor into the selection process. End Comment.)

¶11. (S) Joint Staff General Officers told MILGP Commander November 27 that Minister of Defense Walker San Miguel would be fired in December and that Vargas was a possible replacement (another possible reason he canceled his U.S. trip). We have heard from a press source that hardliner Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana is behind "moderate" San Miguel's ouster, and has leaked information that implicates San Miguel in a corruption scandal.

Comment

¶12. (S) Many officers have registered resentment of the Bolivian Government to our MILGP and DAO sections and indicated they would side with the Media Luna in case of civil unrest. It is unknown what proportion of the armed forces shares their views. Another possible source of

insubordination and friction within the military are the enlisted troops, a much greater proportion of whom are from working-class backgrounds and more inclined to support the government than the officer corps. However, they are unhappy that the government provided a larger pay raise to the officer corps than to them. Would they follow commanders who support the Media Luna against President Morales? We believe they would likely be influenced by loyalty first to command, then to region, and lastly to political affiliation. How these influences play out in a conflict is further muddled by the reorganization of the military last year, which ensures all units are roughly evenly split between conscripts from the Media Luna and the pro-Morales Alto Plano.

¶13. (C) Comment continued: While the La Paz high-command pays lip service to the military's constitutional role, they are ultimately vulnerable to political pressure. Senior field commanders, however, are more concerned with protecting their institution. They fear a repeat of 2003, when the military was called to quell demonstrations and, following a change in government, harshly criticized for their conduct and charged with crimes. They are afraid of similarly exposing themselves to the use or misuse of political forces, only to take the blame when things go wrong. End Comment.

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